

THE ARMY BEFORE LAST:

BRITISH MILITARY POLICY, 1919 - 1939
AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE U.S. ARMY TODAY

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**British Military Policy, 1919 - 1939
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by

Geoffrey P. Megargee

August 1997

Many analysts inside and outside the Pentagon have focused their attention of late on the difficult challenges the United States faces in defining military policy now and for the coming decades.¹ For the army, as for the other services, the problem is multi-faceted. Our military dominance is unquestioned; we face no major threat. That fact, plus a general drive for cost-cutting in government, has prompted broad-based budget cuts and attendant reductions in manpower. These cuts obviously affect the army's ability to fight major wars; the two-war planning model is even now under debate. At the same time, moreover, a multitude of other, smaller missions, ranging from disaster relief to drug interdiction to peacekeeping, threaten to degrade our ability to fight a major war even further. The challenge for the army is to design a force structure and doctrine (or doctrines) that will allow it to handle all these diverse missions with fewer assets, while still maintaining the capability to win a major conflict.

Britain and its army faced a remarkably similar set of circumstances after the First World War. The army emerged from that war victorious. It had developed successful, modern techniques to deal with many of the challenges that the war had presented. In the ten years that followed the Armistice, despite significant obstacles, Britain's army further developed those techniques. To the casual observer, the British seemed to be ahead of the other powers by 1930. However, deep flaws underlay the apparent progress. When Britain next had to fight a major land war, problems with equipment, doctrine and training led to catastrophic defeats in 1940 and 1941, and to performance thereafter that was spotty at best.

Several interrelated factors contributed to the army's unreadiness for continental war in 1939. First there were those obstacles to readiness that were external to the army itself: widespread anti-military and specifically anti-army feeling, reflected in governmental foreign and military policy; reduced access to financial and human resources; and expanded commitments within the Empire. These obstacles were crucial, since they deprived the army of the amount and types of equipment it needed to prepare for and fight a large-scale war on the continent. However, a set of internal factors prevented the army from overcoming the external obstacles to any greater degree than was in fact the case. Conservatism, doctrinal confusion, structural inflexibility, and a lack of professionalism combined to create an army that was not even prepared for the last war, never mind the next one.

When the guns fell silent at 11:00 on November 11, 1918, the British army had grown in size and capabilities to a degree unprecedented in its history. On the Western Front alone, Britain had nearly 1,800,000 men under arms, down from a peak of two million. These men were organized in sixty-one infantry and three cavalry divisions, within five armies and nineteen corps; a further nineteen infantry and three cavalry divisions were serving elsewhere. Expenditures for the army for the year ending March 31, 1919 totalled £824,259,300, a greater than twenty-fold

¹ See, for example, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command pamphlet no. 525-5, *Force XXI Operations*, 1994; and Eliot A. Cohen, Harry G. Summers, Jr. and Donald Kagan, "Are U.S. Forces Overstretched? A Conference Report," in *Orbis. A Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 41, no. 2, Spring 1997, 175-207.

increase over the pre-war figure. And in professional terms, the army that these funds supported was a far cry from the green force that had marched cheerfully to the slaughter at the Somme in 1916. In that last autumn of the war it won nine major battles and had nearly equaled the combined performance of its American, French and Belgian allies in prisoners and guns taken.²

The end of the war, however, brought with it immediate and urgent calls to demobilize this enormous force. These calls had their origins in several sets of circumstances. For one thing, there simply no longer seemed to be much need for a large army. Victory had brought with it the collapse of the four great empires of Central Europe. Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire had all been defeated; Russia was in the throes of civil war. The Old Order was gone, and no new empire arose to fill this void and challenge Britain in the years immediately after the war. In the meantime plans were afoot for a League of Nations which, most Britons hoped, would solve the world's problems through discussion and arbitration rather than bloodshed. Few people could imagine that any statesman, given the mass slaughter that had just taken place, would willingly start another war in Europe. Britain had lost three-quarters of a million killed and twice that many badly wounded. No one wanted to contemplate such a sacrifice again. Disarmament and collective security were therefore the bywords of the day.³

In addition, Britain was suffering through a serious economic crisis. The war had used up a vast amount of the nation's actual and potential wealth and degraded its competitive position. Britain was now a debtor nation, whereas before the war it had been a creditor. It owed the United States over £820 million and held uncollectable debts of over £2 billion.⁴ The war had also weakened some of Britain's best pre-war customers, especially Germany, and they were slow to recover. A balance-of-payments problem was developing. New York was taking over from London as the world's financial center -- a reflection of the fact that America had grown rich lending money and building arms for the war effort. Unemployment and labor unrest were on the rise, and the public wanted more consumer goods and a higher standard of living, not more arms. As one would expect, the government heeded the public's call and gave these issues, as well as the peace talks in Paris, their attention. As far as the politicians were concerned, the army should return to its 1914 structure and funding levels; other than that they cared little for military affairs.⁵

There existed, however, a counterpoint to the calls for demobilization and economy: a set of commitments, all of which demanded resources. The British Empire had grown during and after the war to its greatest geographic extent ever.

² Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 2-5.

³ Anthony Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-30* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 1; Bond, *Policy*, 10-12.

⁴ Peter Silverman, "The Ten Year Rule," in *The Royal United Services Institution Journal* CXVI/661 (March 1971), 42.

⁵ Clayton, *Superpower*, 2, 17; Bond, *Policy*, 40-41; Keith Jeffery, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire 1918-22* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984), 12, 159.

With the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, Britain took over further mandates in Palestine, Persia and Iraq; tribal wars and nationalist stirrings in all three areas required armed force to control. The British also provided an occupation force in Constantinople and the Dardanelles, where they became embroiled in the Greek invasion of Asia Minor and the Turkish nationalist rising that drove it out. Other occupying forces kept watch on the Rhine and in Silesia against German intransigence, and some of the German colonies in Africa also became British possessions. In northern, southern and eastern Russia, expeditionary forces sent to guard supplies after the Russian surrender in the spring of 1918 stayed on to fight the Bolsheviks, and the Foreign Office was considering the acquisition of further territory in the Caucasus as a buffer for India. Nationalist unrest in that country, as well as a serious war on the Northwest Frontier, kept forces heavily engaged there, while the same kinds of problems cropped up in Egypt and Somaliland. Garrisons were still required in posts stretching from the Caribbean to Cyprus to China. The Irish stepped up their insurgency, sapping the British of military power and political will. And last but not least, the government called out the army to deal with labor unrest at home; for a time there was real fear of a Bolshevik revolution.⁶

The strictly logical reaction to this balance of economic, political and international circumstances would have been to cut back commitments to a level commensurate with resources, but this was politically impossible beyond a certain point. The British had too much national pride and wealth invested in the Empire, and they believed it too important for their economic well-being, to give up any significant portion of it willingly. In any case, just holding on to it was going to prove difficult enough, given the domestic political environment. With the war over, the government embarked willy-nilly on a program of demobilization and budget-cutting, while the army's leaders, with support from a very few politicians, tried to maintain a force large enough to keep the Empire from collapsing upon itself. In this the army succeeded, if only barely.

By the end of 1918 the battle had already been joined. Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), began by warning that the war was not yet over -- only an armistice had been signed -- and the government's demobilization plan would leave the army too weak to carry out its missions.⁷ He and the Secretary of State for War and Air, Winston Churchill, tried two different approaches to the problem. First, they did their best to get the government to cut back on those commitments that were not essential to the defense of the Empire and to avoid taking new ones on. In this they had some success; the Foreign Office dropped plans for additional commitments in the Caucasus and Turkey, for example.⁸ Their second approach was to find additional resources. They were able to have conscription extended until April 30, 1920, and

⁶ Jeffery, *Crisis*, 24, 32-36, 155-56; Bond, *Policy*, 13-19; Clayton, *Superpower*, and Jeffery both contain extensive discussions of the security commitments in the different areas.

⁷ Robin Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime. Britain, 1918-1940, a case study* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1962), 6.

⁸ Jeffery, *Crisis*, 35-42.

they also succeeded in lowering the age of enlistment. The Dominions and India, on the other hand, resisted entreaties to commit their own forces to imperial defense, and the British government remained determined to slash the army's budget.⁹ From Wilson and Churchill's point of view, the situation remained unsatisfactory.

Part of the problem for the army, as for the other services, was that its postwar mission remained only vaguely defined in the first months after the Armistice. With no idea what the government's strategic priorities were, the army had little upon which to base its manning requirements or funding estimates. It could not be sure that the government would not want to maintain some form of continental commitment. This situation finally changed in August 1919. The Cabinet, in concert with the Committee of Imperial Defense, agreed upon the following points:

It should be assumed, for framing revised Estimates, that the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary Force is required for this purpose. . . .

The principal functions of the Military and Air Forces is to provide garrisons for India, Egypt, the new mandated territory and all territory (other than self-governing) under British control, as well as to provide the necessary support to the civil power at home. . . .¹⁰

In conjunction with that statement of goals, which would become known as the Ten Year Rule, the Cabinet set a spending limit of £120 million, £75 million of which would have to suffice for both the army and the air force. The cuts in the budget, not the mission statement itself, constituted the Cabinet's primary interest. The choice of ten years as a time frame did not arise from any detailed examination of possible developments in foreign relations; the Foreign Minister was not even present when the Cabinet reached agreement on the Rule. The Cabinet also ignored an Admiralty study that recommended a five-year time frame, so strategic considerations were apparently not a major factor either. This was strictly a budget-driven decision.¹¹

Wilson had written to Churchill, saying that he saw no danger of a European war for some time to come. All the same, he continued, the likelihood of having to send out an Expeditionary Force to reinforce some point in the Empire was now much greater than it had been before the war.¹² And he protested that the Cabinet's approach to budgeting was exactly backwards. First tally up the forces required to

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 10, 15-16, 31-32, 37-38, 49, 52-55, 155-56; Bond, *Policy*, 10-11, 29, 102; Clayton, *Superpower*, 7, 26-27.

¹⁰ Bond, *Policy*, 24-25; see also Silverman, "Ten Year Rule."

¹¹ Bond, *Policy*, 24; Silverman, "Ten Year Rule," 42.

¹² Keith Jeffery, *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson 1918-1922* (London: The Army Records Society, 1985), 120-22 (letter of August 7, 1919).

meet the commitments, he proposed, then decide on funding levels.¹³ His objections then and later remained fruitless. With the Ten Year Rule in effect, the army's manning level and budget continued to fall toward and even below their 1914 levels. The situation only improved as some of Britain's military commitments began to wind down. In some cases the British simply saw that their efforts were not achieving anything, as in Russia, where the last British troops pulled out in the summer of 1920. In other cases technology presented a fix: automobiles, wireless, and aircraft were especially useful for imperial policing. In Mesopotamia, for example, the air force began in 1921 to handle the policing role alone, using aircraft and a few armored cars, thus releasing most of the army units that had been serving there.¹⁴

The elimination or reduction of several army commitments in the early 1920s alleviated the postwar crisis, but the stress on the army's budget remained. By the summer of 1921 the government had started losing ground politically to opposition from the right and the left, much of it running on anti-spending or 'anti-waste' tickets. The public was unhappy with high government spending and taxation, as well as with high unemployment rates. In reaction, on August 2, 1921 the Cabinet formed the Committee on National Expenditure, headed by Sir Eric Geddes.

This committee's report, which it delivered in July 1922, became known simply as the 'Geddes Report' or the 'Geddes Axe,' after the committee chairman. The report stated that the pre-1914 requirement to maintain six divisions for general service no longer applied, since the Ten Year Rule stipulated that there would be no major war in the immediate future; Britain needed the units at home only to provide replacements for units overseas, to maintain internal security, and to prepare for minor expeditions.¹⁵ Further, the use of new arms such as tanks and aircraft would cut down on the numbers of ground troops required. Based on these assertions, the committee recommended a cut of 50,000 men, involving the disbandment of eight cavalry regiments and twenty-eight infantry battalions, as well as drastic cuts in auxiliary services. The army estimates for 1922-23 should be cut from approximately £75 million to £55 million.¹⁶

The War Office's reaction was predictably negative. There were holes in the committee's recommendations. For one thing, many of the auxiliary services that the committee wanted to cut were necessary to maintain the modern arms that supposedly made the cuts feasible. In the end the army was able to win some concessions, and the budget estimate fell only to £62 million. The public was satisfied with this figure, since in overall terms government spending was much

¹³ Jeffery, *Crisis*, 20.

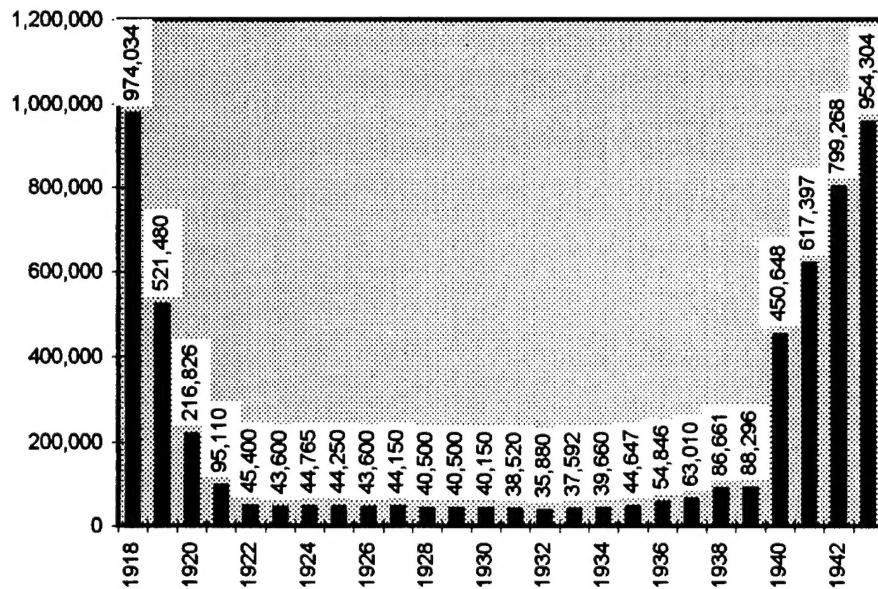
¹⁴ Ibid., 68-70; Clayton, *Superpower*, 79.

¹⁵ The Cabinet had originally only meant the Rule to apply for one year but, although the Rule did not come up for formal review again until 1924, its assumptions remained in place. See Silverman, "Ten Year Rule."

¹⁶ Jeffery, *Crisis*, 22; Bond, *Policy*, 26; Higham, *Armed Forces*, 86.

lower; the anti-waste campaign died down.¹⁷ Still, however, the army's financial situation was serious. Its budget continued to fall right through 1932, as the chart below illustrates.

Annual Army Expenditures, 1918-43, in thousands of Pounds



Source: Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime*, Appendix II, 326-27.

While its budgets fell during the middle and late 1920s, the army's concern over its missions increased. The Ten Year Rule had seemed to offer a clear statement, but it did not always fit with British policy or with public expectations. The public placed a great deal of faith in collective security during these years, and few policy makers questioned the concept's basic assumptions. Their attitude toward the League of Nations is illustrative. The Versailles Treaty of 1919 set up the League, which depended upon collective action to forestall aggression. The public and the government assumed that the League's existence would reduce British commitments, even though the Army General Staff questioned that assumption.¹⁸

The 1925 Locarno treaties, which guaranteed the Franco-German and Belgian-German borders, presented similar problems. Britain's role in the event of any unprovoked aggression would be to join in with the injured party against the aggressor. This seemed a much better alternative to the British than a straightforward alliance with France (which the French had been seeking since the end of the war). Since 1919 the British had slowly become suspicious of France's attitude toward Germany, and Britain did not want to get dragged into a conflict by her Gallic neighbor. In this light the Locarno Pact seemed like the perfect solution.

¹⁷ Jeffery, *Crisis*, 23.

¹⁸ Bond, *Policy*, 31.

But despite the fact that Britain had committed itself to a security guarantee on the Continent, Austen Chamberlain told the Committee of Imperial Defence that the pact represented a reduction, not an extension, of British commitments. The British never earmarked any specific forces to intervene if they had to fulfill their pledge, since no one in the government believed the treaty would ever come into effect. After all, the Locarno treaties also obligated Germany to settle any disputes it might have with France, Belgium, Poland or Czechoslovakia by arbitration rather than war.¹⁹

Outwardly the services shared the government's lack of concern about their nominal continental commitment. Although they did not trust Germany, most British officers believed that it posed no threat in the foreseeable future; nor could they see any other enemy on the European horizon. Still, signs of unease were beginning to appear. In their annual review of 1926, the Chiefs of Staff stated baldly that the size of their forces was "not arrived at by any calculation of the requirements of foreign policy" and further that, "so far as commitments on the Continent are concerned, the Services can only take note of them"; imperial defense had to come first.²⁰ As Brian Bond points out, the Chiefs might well have been protecting themselves against the day when the government would expect the Expeditionary Force to fight on the Continent.

With the passing of the 1920s, the Chiefs' fears began to appear increasingly justified. Expenditures for arms continued to fall; by 1932 they accounted for only 2.5% of the national income, compared with 3.5% in 1913, when British commitments had been less extensive.²¹ In the meantime the Ten Year Rule had begun to lose its appeal. The Cabinet had renewed it annually starting in 1924, and in 1928 Winston Churchill, now Chancellor of the Exchequer, led a successful drive to have the Rule declared a standing assumption until the Services or the Foreign Office offered a good reason to drop it.²² By the early 1930s that reason seemed to be at hand. The Japanese were starting to flex their muscles. The Manchurian Crisis of 1931 prompted the Chiefs to attack the Rule in their annual review for 1932. They stated that it undermined their ability to carry out their missions and made the execution of any policy, no matter how urgent, impossible. Britain's ability to defend its own shores, never mind its possessions in the Far East, was questionable, and it would be unable to send any adequate force to the continent to fulfill its Locarno commitments. The Committee of Imperial Defence accepted the

¹⁹ Ibid., 79-80; Clayton, *Superpower*, 19; Taylor, *English History*, 221-22. Compare these attitudes with the Germans': in 1923, a German Defense Ministry document stated that Germany could only win its freedom, national independence, and economic and cultural rejuvenation through war; see Paul Heider, "Der totale Krieg - seine Vorbereitung durch Reichswehr und Wehrmacht," in *Der Weg deutscher Eliten in den zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Ludwig Nestler (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1990), 43-44.

²⁰ quoted in Bond, *Policy*, 80, see also 74-83; Clayton, *Superpower*, 514-15.

²¹ Taylor, *English History*, 229-30.

²² Silverman, "Ten Year Rule," 44.

Chiefs' views on March 22, 1932, and the Cabinet followed suit the next day. The Rule was dead at last.²³

The Ten Year Rule has been the target of a great deal of criticism. In hindsight, it had obviously outlived its usefulness by 1932, and while it was in effect the Treasury used it as a standing excuse to cut defense expenditures. One must remember two things about the Rule, however. First, it made sense when the Cabinet created it in 1919 and for most of the next ten years. Britain really did not face a major threat, and there was little sense in preparing to face one except on an intellectual level.²⁴ The other point about the Rule is that it was a symptom, not the disease. It grew out of economic and political foundations that did not disappear after it fell. In fact, those foundations took on new strength in the middle and late 1930s, just as real threats to Britain's security emerged.

On the economic side, the removal of the Rule came at a bad time. The world economic crisis was hitting Britain hard, and the government was taking what it considered to be an orthodox approach to the crisis: it cut spending to the bone and left the economy alone to sort itself out. If the Chiefs of Staff believed that the elimination of the Rule would mean an increase in their budgets, they were mistaken. As a matter of fact, when the Cabinet dropped the Rule, it stipulated that, because of the current economic crisis, defense spending would not rise very much.²⁵ The Treasury was worried about Britain's balance-of-payments situation and feared that rapid rearmament might exhaust the nation's resources.²⁶ These orthodox policies finally started to fall by the wayside in 1935, as the international threat became more obvious. By then, however, new factors had appeared that would hinder rearmament almost as effectively as the old stringency had, especially in the army's case. The government did not open its pocketbook very wide, and it misallocated much of the money that it did spend.

The government's policies in this period reflected a complicated mixture of circumstances, perceptions, pressures and assumptions. The first key to understanding those policies is to understand the magnitude of anti-war feeling in Britain. By the early 1930s the sacrifices of the Great War had sunk in, and much of Britain's educated class had come to the conclusion that absolutely nothing was worth the cost of another war. The army suffered more from this attitude than the other services. For one thing, the populace still held the army's leaders responsible for the horrible bloodletting that took place on the Western Front.²⁷ They did not

²³ Bond, *Policy*, 94-96.

²⁴ See K. Booth, "The Ten-Year Rule—An Unfinished Debate," in *The Royal United Services Institution Journal* vol. CXVI no. 663, Sept. 1971, 58-63.

²⁵ Bond, *Policy*, 96; Clayton, *Superpower*, 254-55.

²⁶ Bond, *Policy*, 192.

²⁷ Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, "The British Armed Forces, 1918-39," in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*. Volume II: *The Interwar Period* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988, 1990), 100; Williamson Murray, "Armored Warfare: The British, French, and German experiences," in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 9; Clayton, *Superpower*, 251.

favor further investment in an organization that displayed such callous stupidity. Most leading government figures shared these strong anti-war and anti-army feelings, and the few who did not were often unwilling to risk their careers by promoting their beliefs too strongly.

These attitudes spilled over, naturally enough, into the realm of foreign policy. Britons had trouble grasping the idea that anyone could want to start another war, and that fact affected their actions toward other European states. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his radical rearmament program made the British nervous, but at the same time they wanted desperately to believe that he his intentions were peaceful and honorable. Many Britons sympathized with Germany's position, in fact. They believed that the Versailles Treaty had been unreasonably harsh on the Germans, and they could understand why Germany wanted to regain some of what it had lost.²⁸ One must bear in mind that Hitler was no fool; he fed the western powers a steady stream of propaganda to encourage precisely those sorts of attitudes. Plenty of Britons fell for it, in part because they wanted to.

Economic troubles and pacifism proved a powerful combination. Not until November of 1933 -- eighteen months after it dropped the Ten Year Rule -- did the Cabinet form the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC) to assess Britain's strategic situation and needs. The Committee submitted its first report in February 1934, in which it nominated Germany as the primary threat and proposed a significant increase in defense spending, with the aim of creating an Expeditionary Force that would be sufficiently strong to intervene on the Continent. The Cabinet agreed with the continental commitment in principle but was not prepared to fund it. The DRC's second report, which it submitted in July 1935, was even stronger. It stated that, given the international situation, Britain could not assume that its position would be secure past January 1939. The report went on to say, however, that the services could hardly be ready for war before 1942, even if they received an immediate defense loan of £200 million; the manufacturing capacity to support rapid rearmament simply did not exist after all the years of neglect. That report spurred a more serious effort at last, but nevertheless, some months passed before any real increase in spending became apparent.²⁹

For those men in Britain who were familiar with the nation's defense capabilities in the mid-1930s, a simple fact now acted to reinforce the tendency toward pacifism and appeasement: Britain did not have the forces with which to fight a major war on the continent. Fortunately for their peace of mind -- if not for the final outcome -- there existed a strategic concept that seemed to offer a way out. This concept went by the name of "limited liability." According to its proponents, the best-known of whom was B.H. Liddell Hart, Britain would do best

Murray is quite right to point out that the generals did not deserve such harsh criticism; see "Armored Warfare," 8, n6.

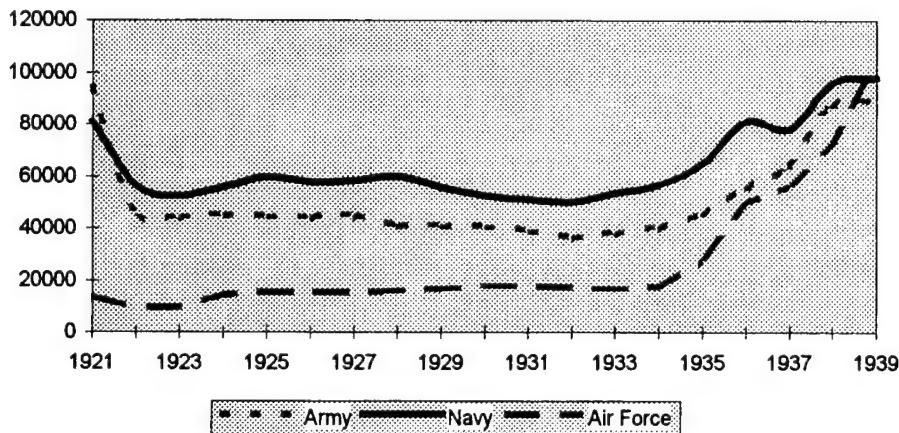
²⁸ Bond, *Policy*, 192.

²⁹ Ibid., 191-92, 214; J.P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks. British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-1939* (Manchester, New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 252, 253.

to avoid fighting a land war on the European continent. Instead, the British should use their navy and air force to blockade and bombard Germany, while the French held the line on the ground. Eventually Britain's economic might would prevail, and at a fraction of the human cost of the Great War.³⁰

The government clung to this idea like a life-ring. The economic aspect gave the Treasury another reason to resist demands for additional funds: economic strength is as important a weapon as military power, they reasoned, and needs to be preserved. In peacetime it would act to deter an aggressor; in wartime Britain's credit would allow it to buy arms abroad. For similar reasons the navy and air force should receive the lion's share of the money. First of all, in peacetime they were "deterrent" forces, whereas the army was "aggressive."³¹ Second, in wartime they would defend Britain against invasion or a knockout blow from the air, thus giving Britain time to use its economic power.³² The effect of these ideas became obvious in 1934 when, on the recommendation of Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the government halved the army's budget allocation, kept the navy's the same, and doubled that of the air force. For the next five years the government's priorities remained unchanged:

Defense Expenditures by Service in thousands of Pounds



Source: Higham, *Armed Forces in Peacetime*, Appendix I, 326-27

The situation took on its worst aspects during the government of Neville Chamberlain, who moved up from the Treasury to become Prime Minister in Spring 1937. Chamberlain entered into a series of diplomatic agreements that committed Britain to a policy of continental involvement, but all the while his military strategy concentrated on home and imperial defense. In 1937 he actually cut the army's

³⁰ For Liddell Hart's explanation of this doctrine, see his book *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1934); for a recent rebuttal, see Bond, *Policy*, 1.

³¹ See Neville Chamberlain's remark in Bond, *Policy*, 41.

³² Bond, *Policy*, 243.

proposed budget by 70 million, and throughout the later '30s the government insisted that most of the army's spending go for anti-aircraft defenses.³³ Not until March 1939, after Hitler took over that part of Czechoslovakia denied him in the Munich Agreement, did the British government do an about-face and tell the army to prepare an Expeditionary Force to serve on the continent.

By then, of course, there was no way to make up for the neglect of the previous years. The summer of 1939 was a period of chaos in the British army. The goal was to create a force of twenty-eight infantry, seven anti-aircraft and four armored divisions, but only a few infantry divisions would go to France in September, ill-trained and short of every kind of equipment, especially tanks and guns. Neither of the two armored divisions that the British started forming in 1939 saw any combat in 1940. The BEF had to improvise its signals, its administration, and its command structure after mobilization; it even lacked a commander until after Britain declared war.³⁴

Obviously, the shortages that the British army experienced in the interwar period, and especially after 1932, prevented it from keeping up with the armies of its future opponents, especially Germany, in any physical sense. As Brian Bond points out, the creation of a mobile, well-armed Expeditionary Force in the mid-1930s might well have deterred Hitler, or if not, might have been able to check the German armies in 1940.³⁵ The course of the war from that point on could have been very different.

However, although the British soon made up the shortages of 1940, that was not the end of their problems. In 1941 and 1942, and to a lesser extent through the rest of the war, the British often displayed an alarming lack of effectiveness at the operational and tactical levels.³⁶ Those problems, like the material shortages, had their roots in the interwar years, but they were not problems that the army could blame entirely on the politicians. Doctrinal confusion, structural inflexibility, conservatism and amateurism all worked to undermine army effectiveness and innovation from within and to exacerbate the difficulties that the army experienced over missions and resources.

Perhaps the most pervasive and fundamental problem in the army revolved around the issue of professionalism. Before 1914 the army, despite reforms it had made in the late 19th century, remained an essentially amateur force.³⁷ The Great War, through its scope and complexity, forced the army to adapt to some extent. By 1918 it had perfected the tactics of infantry-artillery cooperation and had made great strides in the use of tanks and aircraft. However, the changes were only a

³³ Ibid., 283-84; Murray, "Armored Warfare," 10-11; Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 273-74, 293.

³⁴ See Bond, *Policy*, chapter 11; also Clayton, *Superpower*, 258-59, 274.

³⁵ Bond, *Policy*, 337.

³⁶ See Williamson Murray, "British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War," in Millett & Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, vol. II: *The Second World War*, esp. 110-13, 124-29.

³⁷ See Timothy Travers, *The Killing Ground. The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare 1900-1918* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), esp. part 1; also Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972).

little more than skin deep, and after the war the old attitudes began to reassert themselves. Certainly the intellectual climate in British society played a role here. No army exists in isolation from its society, and Britons of the time demonstrated a "dislike of unpleasant facts, basic theories, and dirty, noisy machinery, as well as a certain snobbishness."³⁸ Society's leaders did not have much interest in things either foreign or intellectual, and they possessed a great belief in unpremeditated, ad hoc government, in "muddling through."³⁹ There was also a belief that, since imperial defense was going to be the army's mission for the foreseeable future, officers did not need to spend too much time thinking about the intricacies of military doctrine. Many officers figured that, in the unlikely event that Britain ever had to fight another major war, the army would adapt as it had after 1914.⁴⁰ These attitudes tended to stifle creativity and encourage the traditionalists in the army's hierarchy.⁴¹

The return to traditional values in the army meant that interest in professional matters gradually declined after the end of the war.⁴² A large proportion of the officer corps came to see the army as a pastime rather than as a profession that required specialized knowledge and skill. Their emphasis shifted to social events and sport, and they judged units' quality by their appearance on parade more than their ability to carry out a mission. Major-General Garrison of the Royal Artillery once said, for example, "Certain it was that a battery whose horses always looked well was a good battery, whether they [sic] could hit a target or not" [emphasis in original].⁴³ Officers deliberately affected ignorance and deprecated doctrine in favor of factors such as innate intelligence, experience, common sense and initiative.⁴⁴ They regarded with suspicion and disdain those few of their comrades who took an active interest in professional matters. There was little interest in military developments abroad or in reading foreign military literature. The famous German armor proponent Heinz Guderian, who devoured all the foreign literature he could, had no counterpart in Britain.⁴⁵

Problems with officer recruiting, education, retention and promotion exacerbated the army's lack of professionalism. The recruiting problem arose from a simple fact of postwar life: the army was not attracting very many smart officer candidates. The generals of the Great War had earned a reputation, often exaggerated, for stupidity and callousness. After the war the "Colonel Blimp" stereotype lingered and even grew, aided by the many postwar memoirs and novels

³⁸ Robin Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain: 1918-1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1966), 21.

³⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 411; Clayton, *Superpower*, 20.

⁴¹ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 412.

⁴² Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-power. British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 158, demonstrate this decline through an analysis of articles in the *Journal of the Royal Artillery*.

⁴³ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁴ Travers, *Killing Ground*, 40-41.

⁴⁵ Bond, *Policy*, 69-70.

that appeared in the late '20s and early '30s. The public did not perceive of the army as an institution that required or rewarded intellect in its leaders, and this idea became in part a self-fulfilling prophesy, as fewer and fewer members of the educated class took commissions.⁴⁶

The few bright minds who entered the service had to struggle not to have the brightness drilled out of them. The education system for the army's officer candidates reflected that of the English "public schools" (i.e. private schools), where the emphasis was on conformity and obedience over intellect or cleverness. The army curriculum included lots of riding, infantry ceremonial drill and physical training, but little modern military technique. The instructors in technical subjects often lacked both knowledge and interest. There was little attempt to bring out any self-discipline and there was no training in leadership. The object of the training was to eliminate rebellion, originality, or departure from the norm. If, having passed through this trial, the new officer was fortunate, he would arrive at a unit where more senior officers would gradually and systematically train him in his duties. More often, new officers found themselves subjected to the same sophomoric regimen they had been through as cadets and had to pick up the skills of their profession as they could.⁴⁷

Life as an officer in the interwar British army did nothing to correct the flaws of the training program. Peacetime service was incredibly dull, especially for the veterans of the Great War (this included all of the majors and many of the captains). Field maneuvers were a farce. In part the emphasis on sport was a reaction to this, but the accepted wisdom was also that the mounted sports such as hunting brought out the character traits that officers needed. The officer who did not participate placed his career in jeopardy, and careers were difficult enough anyway. The prospects of promotion were extremely poor. The Geddes Axe eliminated many of the less talented officers in the lower and middle levels, but the senior ranks were still full of mediocre specimens. Further, the army system of placing senior officers on inactive duty at half-pay when there was no position available, rather than forcing them to retire, prevented many younger, nimbler minds from rising.⁴⁸ By the middle of the 1930s the average age of senior commanders was seven years greater than in 1913, and those younger men who had been waiting for advancement were losing their zeal and their sharpness.⁴⁹

One effect of all these interconnected problems -- the lack of professionalism, the decline in numbers of educated officers, the flaws in officer education and retention -- was to produce an officer corps that lacked the qualities required for modern warfare. In 1942, then-Chief of the Imperial General Staff Lord Alanbrooke wrote in his diary,

"Half our Corps and Division Commanders are totally unfit for their appointments, and yet if I were to sack them, I could find no better! They lack character,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 62-63, 67.

⁴⁷ Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 159-63.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 156; Bond, *Policy*, 44-47, 63.

⁴⁹ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 411; Bond, *Policy*, 52-53.

imagination, drive, and power of leadership.”⁵⁰ With that in mind, one can hardly be surprised that combat performance suffered. However, combat performance is also a function of operational and tactical doctrine, and here there was another serious problem: the army *had no coherent doctrine*.

The officer corps’ lack of professionalism worked in combination with several other factors to bring that state of affairs about. One of those factors was external: with the government steadfastly refusing to consider a continental commitment, there seemed little reason to discuss doctrine for a European land war.

The other obstacles were structural. The first of these was the Cardwell System, by which an equal number of battalions should have been present in England and overseas. The two sets of units were to rotate, so that no one battalion would be stuck overseas for decades, and the units in England were to provide drafts of replacements for their sister battalions. The problem was that, because the units had to be able to rotate, their structures had to be similar; one could not simply decree that a unit in Britain would be structured and trained for continental warfare.⁵¹ The regimental system added a different set of problems.⁵² It had its advantages, primarily in the sense of community it instilled within the units. However, the regiments enjoyed far too much independence; Bond was right when he stated that the army could really be better understood as “a collection of regiments” rather than a coherent whole. Regimental commanders possessed tremendous latitude in how they could train their units. In effect, the British army had no doctrine because each regiment had its own. Had there been a mechanism to spread lessons throughout the army and to enforce some degree of doctrinal consistency, the experimentation at the regimental level could have been an advantage. Instead, the regimental system narrowed officers’ attitudes and obstructed reform.⁵³ Their mindset carried over to their command of British divisions in the Second World War; performance varied greatly from division to division throughout the war.

Doctrinal confusion, a largely unprofessional officer corps, structural inflexibility, the denial of a continental commitment until the last moment, widespread pacifism, growing threats, inadequate resources and worldwide commitments: all these internal and external factors worked together in a complicated ballet that created immense handicaps for the British army as it tried to prepare for the next war. As complex as this picture is, however, it is still

⁵⁰ Quoted in Murray, “British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War,” 91. Note that even Alanbrooke’s criticisms are based upon human qualities rather than professional qualifications; he acknowledges the problem without escaping the old paradigm.

⁵¹ Bond, *Policy*, 51. In point of fact, this problem existed parallel to one of simple numbers. With their worldwide commitments and recruiting problems, the British could never keep an equal number of units at home, nor could they keep those units up to strength.

⁵² As a rule, British officers and men stayed with the same regiment throughout their careers.

⁵³ Bond, *Policy*, 58–62. For an alternative system, see Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine during the First World War* (Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1981).

incomplete, still too bound up with generalizations. This is especially true in connection with officer attitudes. Not all British officers were hidebound and ignorant; some of the finest commanders of the Second World War, including Montgomery, Gort, Wavell, Slim, Alexander, Dill and Pile, managed to resist the intellectual lassitude of the interwar period to some extent.⁵⁴ Nor was the intellectual environment in the British army completely closed. Doctrinal debates did take place, and some of the ideas that came out of them were the most advanced of the day. Although systematic, official efforts to learn the doctrinal lessons of the past war were lacking, some officers engaged in serious debates on the topic, especially in the years immediately following the Armistice.⁵⁵ Specifically, the debates centered on the nature of the next war, the size and structure of armies, the capabilities and limitations of air power, and the use of poison gas and the tank. One must bear in mind that the process of intellectual decay was gradual and that even while it went on, there was room -- and even some official sanction -- within the British army for ideas that did not fit into the mainstream.

Most of those ideas concerned the army's most controversial issue of the interwar period: mechanization. In this field, despite the ambivalence or outright opposition of many officers, despite hostile public attitudes and shortages of funds, Britain experienced a "renaissance in military thought" during the 1920s. Indeed, until the mid-1930s Britain had a reputation as the leader in tank design, the doctrine of mechanized warfare, and the handling and training of mechanized formations.⁵⁶ Given that fact, the need to explain British failures in the next war is that much greater. The mechanization issue serves as a way to measure the limits of British effectiveness in the interwar period.

The spectrum of opinion regarding mechanization and armored warfare was very broad within the British army. Attitudes defy exact categorization, but for sake of analysis one can divide the officer corps into several groups.⁵⁷ At one end of the spectrum was a small group of radicals, men who believed that the tank would dominate warfare in the future and that the other arms would become mere auxiliaries or fade from existence entirely. Another, slightly larger group of officers took a less radical approach; they supported a major revision of tactical doctrine but saw the need to balance and coordinate the different arms rather than subordinating everything to the Tank Corps. The largest group represented the middle point between the extremes. These officers recognized the tactical problems of the Great War but were content to work within their own arms or areas of expertise in order to solve them. They viewed mechanization with suspicion until the late 1920s and

⁵⁴ Bond, *Policy*, 56-57; Jay Luvaas, *The Education of an Army. British Military Thought, 1815-1940* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 331.

⁵⁵ The first attempt to analyze the doctrinal lessons of the Great War began in 1931, when the Army Council gave the task to a hastily-assembled committee; Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 187.

⁵⁶ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 202. This is the most balanced and accurate review of the topic.

⁵⁷ The following analysis of opinions is based upon that in Bond, *Policy*, 130-32.

did not fully grasp the concept of combined arms operations even then. The next group was even more conservative; it did not see a need for tactical revisions of any significance. While they were not opposed to some aspects of mechanization, they did not support independent mechanized formations; they favored, at most, tanks in an infantry support role if conditions demanded. The last faction was completely opposed to mechanization; they saw no need to replace the horse. In practice, many of the officers in the last two groups, and perhaps some of those in the middle as well, did not participate in the doctrinal debates in any constructive way, but fell into amateurism and conscious ignorance.

Most writers on military affairs have focused their attention until recently on the radicals or so-called "military intellectuals." In part this phenomenon is a result of the attention that the radicals deliberately drew upon themselves. Like so many similar groups, they knew that they had to make a big noise in order to be heard, and so they drummed up a lot of publicity in support of their own cause. The man who drummed the loudest was Sir Basil Liddell Hart, an infantry officer who retired in 1924 and became a military correspondent; he used his position to promote the mechanization of the army. As J.P. Harris says of him:

It used to be normal to regard Liddell Hart as the greatest British military thinker of the twentieth century and for many years he was widely believed to be the principal inspiration behind the German 'blitzkrieg doctrine.' It is now generally realized that both his impact on the Germans and his prescience and insight concerning military developments in his lifetime have been vastly overrated. ...it is no longer necessary to take him at his own evaluation.⁵⁸

There is no doubt, however, that he had a significant impact on British thinking; even if his ideas were not terribly original, his influence was such that he helped to shape policy.

After Liddell Hart, perhaps the best-known of the radicals was J.F.C. Fuller. He first achieved prominence in 1919 when he won the Royal United Service Institution's Gold Medal essay competition with his submission, "The Application of Recent Developments in Mechanics and Other Scientific Knowledge to Preparation and Training for Future War on Land." Although he would modify his ideas somewhat in the future, this essay contained his most fundamental assertions, which in turn correspond to the ideas of the other tank advocates to a large extent. Fuller saw the tank as the most important development of the Great War, and he predicted that it would dominate any future conflict completely. He developed a naval analogy in which he referred to tanks as "landships" that would sally forth from fortified "ports" -- logistical bases -- and engage enemy fleets, firing as they went. Aircraft and gas would also play important roles, but the other branches of

⁵⁸ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 201; see also John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988).

the army, the infantry, cavalry, and artillery especially, would fade to insignificance. Small, professional all-tank armies would replace the clumsy conscript forces of 1914-18. Fuller even maintained that tanks could police the Empire.⁵⁹

This was highly original stuff, and Fuller presented it with energy and enthusiasm. He certainly understood the potential of a mechanized formation in broad terms; for the first time in history, a force could have the capability, at least in theory, of moving one hundred miles or more in twenty-four hours, outflanking the enemy and cutting him off from his base of support. But Fuller went too far with his proposals, in several respects. Fuller's analysis, like that of Liddell Hart, who adopted his ideas, used analogy and historical examples rather than empirical data, and so many of their predictions proved dead wrong. In general, he did not have any appreciation for the need to combine the arms. He overestimated the capabilities of the tank and consequently undervalued the need for supporting infantry, artillery, and engineers. Moreover, Fuller was unsuited in personal terms to lead a call for reform. Not only did his radical vision of future war frighten and anger his peers and superiors in other arms but, when he faced opposition, he became tactless, aggressive, and contemptuous, thus provoking his enemies and alienating all but his staunchest allies.⁶⁰

The interwar history of the Tank Corps illustrates the interaction of Fuller's and the other radicals' ideas with the fiscal and intellectual climate then prevalent in the government and the army. On the one hand, many civilian leaders and officers did recognize that mechanization in some form would be necessary. On the other, there was much debate over its proper form, as one can see by examining the spectrum of opinion on the matter. In the last stages of the Great War the British had won their victories using a combination of tank-infantry warfare and the more traditional infantry-artillery tactics, so they took no clear lesson from the fighting.⁶¹

Then in the immediate aftermath of the war, there appeared to be little use for tanks, and they were expensive. The Tank Corps sank from over twenty battalions to four, and after that it survived mostly by switching to armored cars, which were more useful for Imperial policing.⁶² Without a European war in the offing, there was little apparent sense in investing huge sums in an armored force. Instead, the political and military consensus favored gradual, cautious, inexpensive motorization without major structural or doctrinal changes. Here the Ten Year Rule came into play. The official view of the Committee of Imperial Defence was that the Rule 'would not in any way hamper the development of ideas but would check mass production until the situation demanded it.' This proved overly optimistic.⁶³

⁵⁹ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 203-06; Luvaas, *Education of an Army*, 345.

⁶⁰ Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 171, 177-78; Bond, *Policy*, 136-38.

⁶¹ See Murray, "Armored Warfare," 19.

⁶² The Tank Corps became a permanent institution on September 1, 1923 and was renamed the Royal Tank Corps on October 18 of that year. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 197.

⁶³ General Sir William Jackson and Field Marshal Lord Bramall, *The Chiefs. The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff* (London; Washington; New York: Brassey's, 1992), 134; Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 207; Bond, *Policy*, 134-35.

In spite of the obstacles, however, the army was able to squeeze enough money out of the Treasury to do some significant research and development work. By the mid-1920s, tanks were becoming more capable. The best model in Britain (and in the world at that time) was the Vickers Medium, which had a revolving turret and sprung tracks and was capable of road speeds approaching 30 mph. In addition, the army had a variety of armored cars and ‘tankettes’ at its disposal. In 1924 Brigadier George Lindsay first proposed combining these elements into a “Mechanical Force.” He met with little success at first, and although the Secretary of State for War, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, finally approved the idea late the following year, its implementation would have to wait until after Field Marshal Sir George Milne took over as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in February 1926.⁶⁴

Milne and his successors have come under a great deal of criticism for the roles they played in army modernization. The criticism started with the radicals, who considered most of them to be hopelessly out of date and in the way. Their attitudes colored many subsequent historical accounts. Of Milne, for example, Bidwell and Graham say:

Milne’s reputation has been treated harshly by historians and deservedly so, for putting his hand to the plough of army reform and the cause of mechanisation and armoured warfare, and then timidly retreating in the face of a counter-attack by the entrenched representatives of the regimental system. It is difficult to discover what he really thought about anything, but we know what he said.⁶⁵

Milne’s immediate successor, Field Marshal Sir Archibald Amar Montgomery-Massingberd (1933-36), fared even worse; many historical accounts depict him as a staunch conservative who did much more damage than good to the development of armored forces.⁶⁶ The criticism is a bit too harsh. After all, these men faced a great many restrictions on their freedom of action, from the lack of funds or of a clear mission outside of Imperial policing. Also, they could not simply ignore the conservatives and moderates in the army and there was, after all, considerable (and justifiable) doubt as to the validity of the radicals’ ideas. A fair appraisal is that the CIGSs were responsible for some significant strides forward, even while they missed some important opportunities.⁶⁷

The most important and consistent developmental work took place between 1926 and 1932, under Milne. In 1926 he directed the formation of the Experimental Mechanized Force along the lines that Lindsay suggested. Lindsay’s ideas on the subject were closely in sync with those of Fuller (who was serving as Milne’s Military Assistant at the time): he wanted an all-armor force. This aroused

⁶⁴ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 208-10; Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 168.

⁶⁵ Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 154.

⁶⁶ See Murray, “Armored Warfare,” 21-22.

⁶⁷ For more balanced views of the CIGSs, see Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*; Bond, *Policy*; and Jackson & Bramall, *The Chiefs*.

opposition from many officers who, although not opposed to mechanization, saw that Lindsay wanted to eclipse their arms entirely. As a doctrinal idea it was also flawed, as Milne perceived, but the CIGS decided -- for reasons that are unclear -- to support Lindsay's concept anyway. He probably saw no harm in giving the concept a test; after all, the army need not adopt the ideas on a permanent basis. In early June, 1926 Milne announced that the force would take the form that Lindsay preferred.⁶⁸

During that and the next two summers the British carried out extensive tests of the new concepts. In the first year every available type of vehicle took part, and the force practiced many of the essential tactical elements of the doctrine that the Germans would later name *Blitzkrieg*. In later years the force benefitted from the addition of radios, which convinced mechanization enthusiasts that the problem of controlling rapidly-moving mechanized formations was solved.⁶⁹ But Milne and other, more conservative officers decided that the Force had yielded all the lessons it was likely to yield for the moment, so they disbanded it after the 1928 training season. This decision raised howls of protest from the radicals, but in reality there was no thought of stopping development. Plans were in hand to establish a mixed force of light tanks and infantry in 1929, followed by a permanent tank brigade in 1930/31. Maneuvers with an experimental tank brigade under Brigadier Charles Broad did take place in 1931, and these further established the usefulness of radio communications; in the final maneuvers Broad was able to control the entire brigade through a complex series of movements in thick fog, all from his own tank.⁷⁰

At this point the British faced a difficult situation. Obvious problems concerning the structure and use of armored formations remained. The radicals still favored all-tank forces. More careful thinkers saw several flaws in that line of thinking, even while they favored mechanization. The Kirke Committee, for example, which Milne created in 1931 to study the lessons of the Great War, favored expansion of the tank arm but only within the context of a combined-arms team.⁷¹ Many of the stickier problems of armored warfare, such as infantry-armor and artillery-armor cooperation or the integration of vehicles with differing road speeds and cross-country capabilities, had not been solved. Still, one must bear in mind that the British were far ahead of anyone else in the development of armored forces and doctrine at this stage. Had they continued to develop their ideas, they might have been able to develop a force by 1940 that would have rivaled the Germans'.

⁶⁸ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 211-13.

⁶⁹ Jeremy Shapiro, "The Uncertain Trumpet: A Comparative Study of the Adoption of Radio Communications for Land Warfare between the two World Wars and its Effect on the Battle of France," TMs, provided by the author, 8-9.

⁷⁰ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 220-21, 225; Bond, *Policy*, 145-46, 157-58.

⁷¹ Bidwell and Graham correctly point out that the performance of the Kirke Committee provides a good counterpoint to the idea that the army officer corps consisted of a few visionaries and a large number of duds; see *Fire-Power*, 187-90. Unfortunately Milne shelved the Committee's recommendations in 1933.

Unfortunately, in the middle and late 1930s the British did not maintain the momentum they had built up by 1932. The government deserves the lion's share of the blame for this turn of affairs. At first the world economic crisis intervened, but later, when the government finally embarked on a program of serious rearmament, it also adopted the policy of "limited liability," which ensured that armored forces for a continental commitment were dead last on the list of priorities. The army simply could not get the resources it needed to continue the development of tanks and armored doctrine. Even in the 1932 maneuvers, the armored force consisted mostly of obsolete or light tanks, since funding levels did not allow for the production of new, heavier models. When the government finally told the army to prepare for war on the continent in March 1939, there was not enough time to build up the kind of force that was required; the industrial base for such a build-up did not exist. In August 1939 the War Office reported that only sixty of the required 1,646 heavy 'infantry' tanks were available. When Britain went to war, over one thousand of its 1,300 tanks were light tanks, suitable only for colonial defense.⁷²

As indicated earlier, however, the army's difficulties in the Second World War stemmed not just from pre-war government policies but also from choices made within the force, choices concerning the army's mission, equipment and tactics. The debate over the mission was the most fundamental. For almost the entire period in question, most army officers agreed with the government's position that imperial defense should be the army's primary mission. Paradoxically, this group even included some of the staunchest supporters of armored warfare, such as Liddell Hart; his advocacy of the strategy of "limited liability" eliminated the need for the very armored force he promoted so strongly.⁷³ Even after the government changed the mission to one of continental commitment, the army's leaders could not agree on a military strategy. Some favored a mobile, offensive concept that would allow the army to act as a counterstrike force. Many, however, agreed with the defensive French strategy and therefore saw no reason to build up a mobile army.⁷⁴

Structural debates paralleled those regarding the mission. Almost all army officers recognized the need to mechanize by the mid-1930s, but they argued over the direction that mechanization should take. The more radical elements had pushed for the formation of an entire armored division as early as 1928, but Milne rejected the idea -- correctly, at that stage -- because the expense would have required the army to disband badly-needed units elsewhere in the empire for the sake of an untried formation of questionable relevance.⁷⁵ Experiments in 1934 with a 'Mobile Division' -- really the Tank Brigade and an infantry brigade hastily combined -- yielded disappointing results, in part because the final exercise did not test the unit fairly. Soon the General Staff came to view the Mobile Division as an extension of the old cavalry idea; its intended role was to be limited to

⁷² Clayton, *Superpower*, 274; Bond, *Policy*, 328.

⁷³ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 289-90; Bond, *Policy*, 176-77, 338.

⁷⁴ Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 185; Clayton, *Superpower*, 278-79.

⁷⁵ Bond, *Policy*, 145.

reconnaissance, screening, and flank attack, rather than breakthrough and operational exploitation.⁷⁶

The year 1935 marked the point when the British army turned firmly away from the armored division as a pattern and instead settled on a separation of roles for its armored units. The Royal Tank Corps' Tank Brigade would form the basis for infantry-support units; for this purpose it would be equipped with heavy, so-called Infantry ('I') tanks -- when the budget would allow such a move. The army's truly mobile units would consist of the cavalry regiments, outfitted with trucks, armored cars and light or medium ('Cruiser') tanks and eventually organized into Mobile Divisions. In the meantime, the army would mechanize the transport and artillery in standard infantry battalions.⁷⁷

This set of decisions came about as much because of conservatism and inter-arm rivalry as they did from serious doctrinal debate. The Royal Tank Corps, naturally enough, wanted to be the focal point for the army's mechanization program, but its ideas were too radical for most of the army's leaders. The General Staff knew that the horse was on its way out, but the cavalry's functions had not disappeared. Also, the Staff knew it would have political chaos on its hands if it tried to simply disband the cavalry; cavalry officers were far too prominent to allow that approach to work. Thus the only logical step seemed to be to mechanize the cavalry regiments. The cavalry did not like the idea, but it went along because it saw the writing on the wall. Cavalry officers consoled themselves with the idea that at least their role had not changed.⁷⁸

Thus, at the start of the Second World War the British army was saddled with units that were inappropriately structured and poorly equipped. They could have solved those problems, but most of the commanders and principal staff officers were holding onto seriously flawed ideas. The cavalry officers looked upon their fighting vehicles as a sort of armed horse, while the RTC officers believed the tank capable of performing any mission without support from the other arms. They never recognized the importance of tank-vs.-tank combat, nor did they perceive the potential effectiveness of anti-tank guns.⁷⁹ The separation of armor units into infantry-support and cavalry-based roles would continue, paralleled by the separate development of two kinds of tanks, neither of which was as versatile as one good medium tank model would have been.⁸⁰ The result was that, even after the British had made good the shortages of equipment from which they suffered in 1939-40, they continued to employ their forces in a way that put them at a distinct disadvantage against the Germans.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 165-71; Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 261.

⁷⁷ Bidwell & Graham, *Fire-Power*, 191; Bond, *Policy*, 170-72.

⁷⁸ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 258-63; Clayton, *Superpower*, 275; Murray, "Armored Warfare," 27-28; Bond, *Policy*, 174.

⁷⁹ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, 221-29; Bond, *Policy*, 148-49, 157-58.

⁸⁰ To be fair, most armies entered the Second World War with this separation of roles in mind; the difference is that the other armies abandoned it, while the British did not.

Obviously there was no single reason for the decline in the British army's effectiveness between the wars. International developments, economic trends, worldwide commitments, military traditions, domestic politics, technological advances, public attitudes and even individual personalities all came together synergistically to rob Britain of an effective defense policy. However, there are certain elements within this mix that should be of special concern for U.S. policy-makers today.

First of all, one must recognize the central role played by the government. Quite aside from any questions of intellectual openness or doctrinal perceptiveness, the British army could not prepare for a major war on the continent without two things: an understanding that the continental commitment existed, and the resources necessary to maintain some level of readiness and experimentation. Those elements did not come together until far too late. To a large extent the relevant decisions were out of the army's hands, but it did contribute to its own demise by insisting that warfare would return to the pre-1914 pattern.

The notion of "limited liability" was a critical part of that larger equation. The British believed that supremacy at sea and in the air would allow them to sit back and squeeze Germany into submission while the French did the fighting on the ground. That idea was impractical on both military and political grounds. The French army needed support on the ground from a capable British force, and the French public would demand it. In their desire to avoid a ground war at all costs, the British may have missed an opportunity to forestall one or to win it more quickly and cheaply than they did. Here again, the army did not have much say in these larger decisions, but some of its most influential spokesmen lent support to the government's course of action.

Finally, and most important for our purposes, the British army failed to properly use what opportunities it did have to develop a modern force structure and set of doctrines. This failing came about because of the army's tradition of amateurism and conservatism, the Cardwell and regimental systems, and training and promotion programs, all of which harkened back to the 19th century. In short, the structure of the British army and the culture of its officer corps made it ill-suited to the kind of innovation and adaptation that it needed to demonstrate during the entire first half of the 20th century. When combined with the circumstances that prevailed during the interwar period, the army's internal problems made its failures in the Second World War all but inevitable.